

Pentecost 23C (10/23/2016)
 Jeremiah 14:7-10
 Psalm 84:1-7
 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Luke 18:9-14

Pride is the sneakiest sin. As soon as we measure our own worthiness according to the perceived unworthiness of others, we slide into self-righteousness. But, when we claim nothing before God except our need for mercy, we come to know grace, and we become more gracious toward each other.

Don't we love to hate the Pharisees? As monitors of religious observance,¹ the Pharisees risk becoming a sort of stock character in the Gospel of Luke – stuffy legalists whose opposition to Jesus emphasizes the letter of the law over against the grace of God. Jesus repeatedly exposes the Pharisees' narrow conception of righteousness, overturning well worn assumptions about what it means to be a person of faith. As a result, whenever the Gospel introduces us to a Pharisee, we are conditioned to expect an antagonist. Today's Gospel is no exception. So, go ahead, point a finger at the Pharisee in question, give him a scowl, and repeat after me: "Woe to you, Pharisee!" "Self-righteous!" "Judgmental!" "Hypocrite!"²

Have you got it out of your system? Keep pointing! Now, maybe you'll indulge me in a little spiritual exercise. First, take a deep breath, now relax your wrist, and gently turn the finger that's pointing at the Pharisee toward yourself. You see, **the line between saint and sinner cannot be drawn so easily. The danger of pointing out the speck in the Pharisee's eye is to neglect the log in your own.**³

¹ See Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 252.

² See Matthew 23:13.

³ See Matthew 7:3.

And, Jesus' parable in today's Gospel is an especially subtle trap. A Pharisee and a tax collector both go up to the temple to pray. First, the Pharisee prays with confidence: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people" – *immoral people, depraved people, unholy people* – and then he gets personal: "or even like this tax collector." *As you well know, he goes on, I perform my religious duties flawlessly.* Then, the tax collector, bowing his head and pounding his chest, pleads: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" The Pharisee leaves the temple just as smug as when he arrived, while the tax collector returns home justified in God's sight, his humility testifying to the sincerity of his faith.

What a straightforward message: ***This is a Pharisee. He trusts in his own goodness, and separates himself from so-called unworthy others, rather than trusting entirely in God's mercy. Don't be like a Pharisee.***

But be careful. This reading threatens to undermine the very parable on which it is based. The danger lies in coming to view the Pharisee the same way he views others – unfaithful, undeserving, less-than. Congratulating ourselves for our humility, we write the Pharisee off and approach God, ironically, with pride: *God, I thank you that I am not like other people: self-righteous people, judgmental people, condescending people, people like this Pharisee.* And in the instant that we distance ourselves from him, we become just like him.

Pride is the sneakiest sin. **As soon as we measure our own worthiness according to the perceived unworthiness of others, we slide into self-righteousness.** It's a constant temptation. The desire to be right, to be righteous, to be among the "good ones" drives us to continually compare ourselves to the people

around us. We all have preferred criteria by which we score ourselves and others, and wouldn't you know, we all find ways to justify ourselves accordingly. And, self-satisfied, we stand before God with confidence: *God, I thank you that I am not like other people: people who subscribe to that ideology, people who behave that way, people who support that candidate, people like this weirdo sitting next to me in church.*

It's mostly involuntary. We make these judgments automatically and according to deeply ingrained assumptions.⁴ And, the pervasiveness of the problem makes it even more destructive, as our conflicting judgments compound each other and engender bitterness and conflict. Of course, we also tend to neglect our own blind spots. We conveniently ignore our own brokenness at the risk of having to acknowledge our need for mercy. Our imperfections, our ugly habits, the ways we are implicated in suffering – these are hard to face. *Yeah, yeah, we're all sinners, we convince ourselves, but the facts of our own sinfulness are certainly not as bad as the sins of others, are they?*

The difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector is not that one is good and the other is evil. The difference is that one presumes to justify himself before God while the other relies only on God's mercy. The Pharisee's error lies in failing to recognize the true source of goodness. As hard as he tries, he cannot be good enough on his own; he cannot earn his place God's good graces. The tax collector, on the other hand, a bona fide sinner, recognizes God's gracious nature and so commends himself entirely to God. And in this way, he becomes a model of faith.

⁴ See David J. Lose, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2967.

Only God is good, and we are all beggars.⁵ When we confess our sins, we entrust ourselves to a God who knows the worst of our judgment and rejection, yet who would rather die than hold our brokenness against us.

Regardless of the points for or against us, God wipes our scorecard clean by God's own enduring mercy. So, repentance doesn't mean conjuring up feelings of guilt, but rather letting go of the urge to prove our own righteousness. And, **when we claim nothing before God except our need for mercy, we come to truly know grace, and we become more gracious toward each other.**

To that end, maybe you'll indulge me in another spiritual exercise. The Eastern Orthodox tradition gives us a beautiful little prayer that is intended to be prayed repeatedly, like a mantra, as a means of opening the heart to God. It's called the "Jesus Prayer," and it's based on the prayer of the tax collector in the parable from our Gospel today. As I pray, I invite you to be still, set your heart and mind at rest, and join me either silently or aloud as we enter again into God's grace.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

⁵ Martin Luther.